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**Deadly Combinations: How Leadership Contexts Undermine the Activation and  
Enactment of Followers' High Core Self-Evaluations in Performance**

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**Abstract**

Employees with high core self-evaluations (CSE) generally perform well in their jobs. The enactment of CSE in performance occurs within contexts, and leadership is one form of context that influences the activation and expression of CSE. Drawing on theories of CSE and leader-member exchange (LMX), we characterized the leadership context as the interaction between leader CSE and LMX quality. Examination of 173 followers and their 31 leaders in a manufacturing organization showed a positive association between follower CSE and performance when the context comprised high leader CSE and high LMX. Conversely, leadership contexts comprising high leader CSE and low LMX, or low leader CSE and high LMX, resulted in a negative relationship between follower CSE and performance. We also show that low CSE followers have relatively higher performance under some circumstances. Thus, we contribute to understanding how some leadership contexts undermine high CSE followers' performance and promote low CSE followers' performance.

*Key words:* Leadership, leader-member exchange, core self-evaluations, trait activation theory, performance, self-regulation

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### Deadly Combinations: How Leadership Contexts Undermine the Activation and Enactment of Followers' High Core Self-Evaluations in Performance

People who are emotionally stable, have a positive sense of self-worth, and feel in control of their lives perform well across environments (Erez & Judge, 2001; Swider, Zimmerman, & Barrick, 2015). Such dispositions are the basis of core self-evaluations (CSE), the “fundamental premises that individuals hold about themselves and their functioning in the world” (Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997, p. 168). The CSE literature is replete with evidence that high CSE influences self-selection of challenging goals and high levels of performance that are commensurate with self-evaluations (Chang, Ferris, Johnson, Rosen, & Tan, 2012).

However, the relationship between CSE and performance always occurs within a context. Organizations create powerful situations with the intention of influencing behavior; thus a systemic approach to understanding performance is important. As Johns (2006, p. 404) stated: “Attention to the shining figure at the expense of the murky ground is perhaps understandable, but it is also dysfunctional.” High CSE employees performing at the height of their ability are shining figures indeed. However, their lustre is fundamentally connected with the milieu that surrounds them. Although enabling high performance is a key goal for leaders (Bass, 1999), the complex interplay between dispositions and contextual variables that culminates in high performance also creates the possibility that interactions involving leaders and followers have negative consequences for performance. Such interactions can be explained by trait activation theory (TAT, Tett & Burnett, 2003) which posits that traits need to be activated by contextual factors to be expressed in trait-relevant behaviors. The corollary is that contexts which do not activate traits do not facilitate performance.

Empirical evidence has shown that, in some situations, CSE fails to lead to high performance. For example, Judge and Bono's (2001) meta-analysis showed that, across 274

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correlations between components of CSE and performance, there were positive, negative and non-significant relationships. Kacmar, Collins, Harris and Judge (2009) found evidence that the CSE-performance relationship may be negative in certain contexts, and a similar conclusion was drawn by Shantz and Booth (2014). A common theme in these studies is the role of leaders in creating environments that shape the enactment of dispositions in performance. Given that high CSE is a latent potential that underpins people's psychological make-up (Tett & Burnett, 2003), examination of leadership contexts is important because they could undermine the opportunity for followers' high CSE to be activated and expressed in performance which is unfulfilling for followers (Higgins, Strauman, & Klein, 1986), and is damaging to organizational climate and productivity (Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999).

To define and operationalize leadership context, we turned to Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) assertion that leadership is a tripartite concept comprising leaders, followers and the relationship between them (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The first two elements of Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) leadership concept is the people involved. Given the relevance of CSE to performance, and the universality of dispositional characteristics (McCrae & Costa Jr, 1997), CSE is an attribute of both leaders (ICSE) and followers (fCSE) that forms an interpersonal aspect of the leadership context. The third element of the leadership context is the relationship between leaders and followers. A dominant relational concept is leader-member exchange (LMX; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) which suggests that followers develop positive relationships with leaders when there is an exchange of valued tangible and intangible resources, such as support and responsibilities. High quality LMX relationships are characterized by trust, liking, loyalty and respect (Liden & Maslyn, 1998).

Thus, we characterize the leadership context as the combination of ICSE and LMX quality. Although prior research suggests that on their own, high CSE leaders are perceived

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positively by followers (Hu, Wang, Liden, & Sun, 2012), and high quality relationships provide resources that are important to performance (Erdogan & Liden, 2002), examining these variables simultaneously offers an opportunity to extend relevant theory and test how several different forms of context influence the fCSE-performance relationship. We describe leadership contexts that have aligned levels of ICSE and LMX, i.e. high ICSE and high LMX, or low ICSE and low LMX, as situationally congruent. Contexts with opposing levels of ICSE and LMX (e.g. high ICSE, low LMX, and low ICSE, high LMX) are situationally dissonant. We then examine the impact of situational congruence and dissonance on high and low CSE followers because they differ in their needs and expectations (Judge et al., 1997).

We draw a parallel between dissonant situations and “deadly combinations”. Deadly combinations comprise contextual variables that are positive when operating independently yet are negative when operating in conjunction. In the context of human resource management, for instance, encouraging teamwork via group-based training, and making pay raises contingent on individual contributions, are seemingly harmless on their own. Together, however, they constitute a deadly combination because they introduce conflicting goals (Becker, Huselid, Pickus, & Spratt, 1997) which are aversive (Korman, 1970) and depleting because energy is directed in several different directions (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Thus, although high ICSE and high LMX both have beneficial effects on followers, we posit that when these leadership attributes are juxtaposed with low LMX and low ICSE respectively, the situational dissonance presents a deadly combination that prevents the activation and enactment of high fCSE in performance.

With this study, we make several contributions to the literature. First, CSE theory and research tend to assume that “more is better”, particularly in the presence of situational variables that strengthen CSE’s effect on outcomes valued by organizations (Chang et al.,

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2012). However, there are relatively few studies that have identified the conditions under which high CSE is associated with low performance. Given that performance is *the* criterion variable in the management sciences, and that high CSE employees seek to fulfil their drive to perform (Judge et al., 1997), more research on the conditions under which the relationship between CSE and performance is negative is sorely needed to prevent the distress caused by misalignment between traits and behaviors (Cote & Moskowitz, 1998). We also extend CSE theory by considering the possibility that, in some contexts, high CSE followers have low performance, and low CSE followers have relatively high performance.

Second, we contribute to research and theory on leadership that has examined congruence in traits between leaders and followers. Although this research has much to say about the beneficial effects of trait similarity on relationship quality (Deluga, 1988), perceptions of leadership (Felfe & Schyns, 2010), and organizational advancement (Schaubroeck & Lam, 2002), there is an assumption that trait congruence between leaders and followers necessarily leads to positive work-related outcomes. Yet, traits function in concert with other variables, and there are still questions concerning the possibility that dispositional congruence between leadership and followers has negative outcomes under some circumstances.

We make another contribution to leadership theory by applying TAT and the complementary theory of self-regulation to examine the differential effects of situationally congruent and situationally dissonant contexts on the relationship between fCSE and performance. Self-regulation is the process of “attaining and maintaining (i.e., keeping regular) goals, where goals are internally represented (i.e., within the self) desired states” (Vancouver & Day, 2005, p. 158). Self-regulation is required to enact high CSE in performance (Erez & Judge, 2001). Contexts that place additional burdens on self-regulation

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have detrimental consequences for performance (Thau & Mitchell, 2010). We contribute to the leadership literature by identifying deadly combinations that increase self-regulatory demands and prevent high fCSE from being expressed in performance. Figure 1 depicts the research model.

*Insert Figure 1 about here*

### Theory and Hypotheses

**The relationship between CSE and performance.** CSE is conceptualized as a higher order construct comprising self-esteem, locus of control, generalized self-efficacy, and emotional stability (Judge & Bono, 2001). Together, these facets form a relatively robust dispositional characteristic that affects a range of personal and professional outcomes (Judge & Bono, 2001). Judge et al. (Judge et al., 1997; Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998) proposed that individuals with high CSE have a strong sense of self-belief that enables persistent efforts to achieve goals. Erez and Judge (2001) suggested that the connection between CSE and performance is underpinned by self-regulatory processes that enable the effortful enactment of dispositions in behavior. Research studies have supported the connection between CSE and performance, showing that high CSE enables followers to be receptive to feedback, and to develop constructive responses that enhance performance (Bono & Colbert, 2005). People with high CSE pursue higher educational goals and take care of their health, in line with their positive self-concept, enabling them to make faster and greater progress in their careers than peers with lower CSE (Judge & Hurst, 2008). High CSE also enables people to capitalize on events by extending learning through application of new information to other situations, whereas people with low CSE tend to feel anxious after successful events, and seek to reinforce their negative self-view thus precluding learning and personal development (Judge & Hurst, 2007).



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However, research has shown that the relationship between CSE and performance can be neutral or even negative under certain conditions (Grant & Wrzesniewski, 2010). One explanation for non-significant or negative CSE-performance relationships may be found in Campbell's (1990) view that performance is a consequence of the interactions between dispositions and contextual factors. Judge and Zapata (2015) have added depth to the interaction-based perspective by identifying specific contextual variables that affect the extent to which personality is associated with performance. Several empirical studies have taken this approach. Kacmar et al. (2009) showed that high CSE followers have low performance when they perceive high levels of workplace politics or low levels of leader effectiveness. Shantz and Booth's (2014) study of call center employees indicated that there are situational influences that limit, or subvert, the potential for CSE to be expressed in high performance. Thus, the positive relationship between CSE and performance does not hold in all situations, and some contextual variables change not only the strength but also the direction of the association between CSE and performance.

**Trait activation and performance.** The notion of situational influence on the expression of personality arose from Murray's (1938) concept of "press", i.e. the presence of task and social cues that make the expression of certain traits relevant to specific situations. Building on this idea, Tett and Guterman (2000) found evidence for stronger relationships between traits and behavioral intentions when situations provide cues that trigger trait expression. Subsequently, Tett and Burnett (2003) proposed that positive associations between traits and job performance arise when there are cues that trigger the expression of the trait, such as leaders who inspire high performance by activating achievement-related dispositions. Trait expression is then reinforced by intrinsic rewards, such as the enjoyment of completing tasks competently, and extrinsic rewards, such as recognition by a manager.

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Therefore, understanding how contextual features activate traits is essential to achieve greater insights into the connections between fCSE and performance. It is equally important to examine how, in the absence of activating features, leadership contexts remain influential with both positive and negative consequences for performance.

Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) conceptualization of leadership as comprising leaders, followers and the relationship between them provides the means to illuminate the fCSE-performance relationship. The three elements are interconnected by the notion of evaluation. Self-evaluations enable a constant and dynamic assessment of the self in context to enable control and to direct behavior (Kanfer, 1970), and to understand the position of the self in the social world (Katz & Kahn, 1978). CSE is a key element of self-evaluation that reflects the views that people have about themselves, their abilities and their control (Judge et al., 1997).

Self-evaluations also require information from the social environment (Ashford, Blatt, & Walle, 2003) because people seek certainty about themselves and their place in the world (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Social information is derived from the LMX relationship. The concept of LMX rests on social exchange theory which proposes that reciprocal exchanges are essential to any functioning relationship (Blau, 1964). These exchanges encompass transactions relating to the performance of work as well as more intangible exchanges such as positive feedback (Gouldner, 1960). Drawing on these principles, LMX theory suggests that leaders develop positive relationships with followers when there is an exchange of valued outcomes, such as support and responsibilities (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen, 1976). These exchanges are discretionary (Bateman & Organ, 1983) so followers are motivated to demonstrate their appreciation of leaders' offers of resources, typically by performing to a high level (Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997).

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Given that people seek to evaluate both the self and the self in context (Katz & Kahn, 1978), and that the leadership context is a source of personal and social information which exerts press (Murray, 1938; Tett & Burnett, 2003), we propose that simultaneous information from both leaders and the relationship between leaders and followers influences the relationship between fCSE and performance. In the sections that follow, we discuss the specific impact of four types of leadership contexts on the fCSE-performance relationship, and their differential impact on the performance of high and low CSE followers.

**Situational congruence and trait activation.** Task and social demands activate traits by providing opportunities for followers to engage in performance-related behaviors that are valued positively within the organization (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Facilitators are variables that heighten the salience of trait-relevant information thus strengthening associations between traits and behaviors. For example, a workplace retreat with colleagues activates the trait of extraversion in a gregarious yet physically isolated manager, and an opportunity to attend a social event facilitates that activation (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Following this line of argument, we propose that a leadership context comprising high ICSE and high LMX acts as a facilitator that makes task and social demands salient to high CSE followers.

Prior research has shown that high CSE leaders express emotional stability, a sense of control over events, and self-belief; so followers perceive these leaders as confident (Hu et al., 2012), and as representing an idealised view of leadership (Keller, 1999). High quality LMX relationships provide access to mentoring (Graen & Scandura, 1987), information relevant to task performance (Graen, 1989), and involvement in decision making (Bauer & Green, 1996; Schriesheim, Neider, & Scandura, 1998). We propose that, when operating in conjunction, the combination of high ICSE and high LMX is a potent mix that is situationally congruent and a clear fit with high CSE followers' needs for affirmation (Markus & Wurf, 1987) and

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attainment (Tett & Murphy, 2002). In line with Tett and Burnett's (2003) argument concerning demands and facilitators, this context presents an opportunity for high CSE followers to engage with the challenges of work, and makes the demands salient to them. Thus, the high ICSE, high LMX context activates high fCSE and enables its enactment in performance.

Although Tett and Burnett (2003) did not examine the activation of low trait levels, the key principles can be applied to low CSE followers in this leadership context. Low CSE followers have low expectations of themselves, and they do not expect to be accommodated by others (Judge, Van Vianen, & De Pater, 2004) so this leadership context does not present a welcome demand for achievement. Furthermore, the situational congruence presents a context that contrasts strongly with the self-evaluations and needs of low CSE followers who respond by disassociating themselves from the context (Kelley, 1971; Malle, 2004). Thus, for low CSE followers, the high ICSE, high LMX context is non-activating because cues that trigger low fCSE are not present. However, the context does not pose a challenge to either low CSE followers' personal identity, or their social identity (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and is not detrimental to low CSE followers. The consequence is that performance is neither facilitated nor impaired, yet it will be low in comparison with high CSE followers (Judge et al., 1997; Judge et al., 1998). Hence, we present our first hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 1: There is a positive association between fCSE and performance when the leadership context is characterized by high ICSE and a high quality LMX relationship.*

**Situational dissonance, distraction and performance.** Tett and Burnett (2003) proposed that distractors disrupt performance by triggering behavioral responses to the distractor rather than high performance behaviors. For example, an empirical study by Schmidt, Ogunfowora and Bourdage (2012) found that extraverted employees in teams

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comprising a high proportion of extraverts enjoyed the social interaction that the team setting offered, yet their socializing distracted their attention away from performance and thus the expression of extraversion was not organizationally valued. Therefore, distractors have a negative influence on the trait-behavior relationship. However, Tett and Burnett (2003) did not expand on how distraction occurs.

To explain how distraction influences the CSE-performance relationship, we apply Erez and Judge's (2001) suggestion that a high degree of self-regulation is required to generate the effort required for the expression of high CSE in performance. In general, self-regulation is necessary for effective functioning because it provides the means for individuals to control their own and others' perceptions about themselves (Hoyle, 2006). In doing so, people find fulfilment by affirming their self-evaluations (Vancouver & Tischner, 2004). The extent to which self-regulation occurs is influenced by contextual features that enable self-regulation to proceed smoothly by presenting information that is consistent with self-evaluations, or that distract self-regulation by presenting information that is inconsistent with self-evaluations (Schmeichel & Baumeister, 2004). Experiencing the latter context motivates attempts to understand the causes and consequences of the inconsistency (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Thau, Aquino, & Poortvliet, 2007).

We propose that dissonant situations prevent the activation of high fCSE and its enactment in performance because they increase the effort required to self-regulate by presenting conflicting information for followers to process, i.e. there are benefits and challenges of working with a high CSE leader yet having a poor quality relationship, or of having a high quality relationship with a low CSE leader. The consequence is that high CSE followers experience inconsistent cognitive states which are contrary to their personal evaluations and their needs (Judge et al., 1997). Such inconsistent states are aversive

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(Korman, 1970). The experience of aversion directs attention towards the source of the inconsistency, and towards means of restoring balance between self-evaluations and information presented by contexts (Greenwald & Ronis, 1978). The deployment of internal resources to overcome the personal challenges presented by situations requires energy which becomes depleted (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007) leading to negative consequences for working memory and performance (Robinson & Demaree, 2007; Schmader & Johns, 2003). Hence, the connection between high fCSE and performance is disabled in dissonant leadership contexts. Therefore, we expect that leadership contexts characterized by high ICSE and low LMX, or low ICSE and high LMX, are deadly combinations for high CSE followers that are detrimental to their performance.

Low CSE followers do not engage in the same high level of self-regulation as their high CSE colleagues (Erez & Judge, 2001). The consequence is that low CSE followers do not perceive dissonant leadership contexts as challenging to their self-regulation which enables them to take advantage of situational opportunities. A low ICSE, high LMX context confers the benefit of trait similarity which is affirming to both parties because it reinforces self-evaluations (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Trait similarity is particularly important within the leadership context because it creates a sense of fulfilment and motivation for followers (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993) which stimulates performance (Soane, Butler, & Stanton, 2015).

The low ICSE, high quality LMX context offers low CSE followers an important form of similarity. People with low CSE seek out others who share their temperament because, even though their self-evaluations are negative, similarity is achieved (Ehrhart & Klein, 2001; Swann, 2012). Although low CSE followers are not motivated to set and achieve high goals in the same manner as high CSE followers (Chang et al., 2012), this leadership context offers the

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dual benefits of dispositional correspondence with tangible and intangible resources. Given that the context is not a challenge to low CSE followers' self-regulation (Erez & Judge, 2001) or to their identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), the resources offered by a high LMX relationship with a dispositionally similar leader enable low CSE followers to achieve a relatively high level of task performance compared with their high CSE colleagues.

The high ICSE, low quality LMX leadership context is situationally dissonant. However, as noted above, the context does not present a self-regulatory challenge to low CSE followers (Erez & Judge, 2001). Nor does the context provide a challenge to low CSE followers' personal evaluations because they do not anticipate supportive leadership (Johnson, Rosen, & Levy, 2008), or favourable working environments (Wiesenfeld, Swann, Brockner, & Bartel, 2007). Thus, the high ICSE, low LMX leadership context is not problematic for low CSE followers; however, this context does not confer the benefits of dispositional congruence. The consequence is that low CSE followers' performance is lower than the performance of low CSE followers in the low ICSE, high LMX context, yet higher than the performance of high CSE followers who are challenged by the situational dissonance.

In summary, the relationship between fCSE and performance is negative for high ICSE, low LMX and low ICSE, high LMX leadership contexts. The activation and enactment of high fCSE is prevented by the self-regulatory challenges imposed by dissonant contexts which divert energy towards restoring internal consistency and away from performance. Dissonant contexts pose less of a challenge to low CSE followers because they are not engaged in high levels of self-regulation (Erez & Judge, 2001). Dissonant contexts may also affirm followers' low CSE. Therefore, low CSE followers have relatively high performance in comparison with high LMX followers. Hence, we present our second hypothesis.

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*Hypothesis 2: There is a negative association between fCSE and performance when the leadership context is characterized either by high ICSE and a low quality LMX relationship, or by low ICSE and a high quality LMX relationship.*

**The prevention of performance.** We propose that the low ICSE, low LMX leadership context precludes performance of both high and low CSE followers. For high CSE followers, this context imposes a constraint upon the enactment of their CSE in performance. Constraints inhibit trait expression because the environmental cues that are required for trait activation are absent (Tett & Burnett, 2003). For example, a study of the influence of situational constraints on trait-performance relationships showed that people with high scores in the trait of conscientiousness performed poorly in creative thinking tasks when given complete discretion and no direction for task completion because there were no cues to trigger their conscientiousness and the associated tendencies for achievement striving. However, the same conscientious employees performed well when they had clear instructions that triggered their drive to achieve (Robert & Cheung, 2010). We suggest that the functioning of high fCSE is analogous because, like employees who are conscientious, high CSE followers require an appropriate context to trigger their CSE and enable its expression in performance.

In addition, although activating cues are absent in the low ICSE, low LMX context, we suggest that there is less of a challenge to high CSE followers' self-evaluations. The context is situationally congruent yet presents a sharp contrast with high CSE followers' self-evaluations, and thus does not cohere with followers' goals (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). This discrepancy enables high CSE followers to attribute the properties of the context to the leader rather than to themselves (Thau & Mitchell, 2010). Therefore, the context does not cause the internal inconsistency and self-regulatory impairment that are produced by the high ICSE, low LMX or the low ICSE and high LMX leadership contexts. For high fCSE followers, this



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context does not activate their CSE and enable higher performance (Tett & Burnett, 2003) nor does it undermine performance because self-regulation is not impaired (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007).

Low CSE followers have a different response to the low ICSE, low LMX context. According to CSE theory (Judge et al., 1997; Judge et al., 1998), low CSE followers have poor self-evaluations, low expectations of themselves and set low-level goals. Although Tett and Burnett (2003) focus their attention on the activation of high trait levels, their arguments also apply to low trait levels. The low ICSE, low LMX context is situationally congruent and it accords with low CSE followers' self-evaluations. The confluence of a dispositionally similar leader, low levels of resources and low personal expectations all serve to reinforce low CSE followers' views of themselves. The consequence is that followers' low CSE is activated and performance efforts are commensurate with their self-evaluations.

Therefore, following Tett and Burnett's (2003) arguments concerning both the constraint and the activation of traits, we suggest that the low ICSE, low LMX leadership context nullifies the fCSE-performance relationship. This is because high fCSE is not activated so cannot be enacted in performance, whereas low fCSE is activated and is expressed in low levels of performance. Given that there is no theoretical guide for hypothesizing whether high or low fCSE suffer the most performance detriment in this context, we propose, we propose that there is no relationship between fCSE and performance in a low ICSE, low LMX leadership context.

## Methods

**Participants and procedures.** This study's sample was from a manufacturing firm located in the United Kingdom that produces blow-moulded plastic bottles for the food and drink industry. This organization was selected because employees' tasks are mainly specific

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and unchanging, e.g. moving operating equipment to the appropriate place on the factory floor, or reducing wastage from the production process, and performance is typically observable. The sample met three criteria important for the examination of trait activation (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Employees were not selected on the basis of their CSE; hence, levels of CSE could be expected to vary. There were relatively few opportunities for employees to change the nature of their work. Furthermore, the leadership controls were not so strong as to motivate uniform behavior in all followers, and performance levels should vary. In addition, given the clearly defined and observable nature of the work, evaluations by leaders' ratings offered a meaningful way to assess performance (Wherry & Bartlett, 1982).

The HR manager provided the research team with a complete list of the names of leaders to whom followers reported. Prior to survey distribution, the questionnaires were number coded, so that participating followers could be matched with their respective leader. The research team invited all 509 employees to participate. Employees were informed about the purpose of the study, and its confidentiality, and encouraged to take part. Participants were given time to complete the paper and pencil survey at work and were asked to send it back to the research team within two weeks. Overall, 278 questionnaires were returned, constituting a 55% response rate.

Four months after survey completion, a questionnaire was sent to all participants' leaders asking them to rate the task performance of their followers. Leaders were not given information about their followers' responses to the survey to ensure confidentiality. Of the 47 leaders who were asked, 46 leaders agreed. All but 8 of the participating leaders rated each of their participating followers giving an average performance rating response rate of 97.6% ( $SD = .06$ ); response rates per participating leader ranged from 75% to 100%. Overall, 253 leader ratings of participating followers' performance were returned to the research team and

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matched with the respective follower's survey. Of the 253, 8 follower surveys were dropped because of missing data. Thirty-one of the 46 participating leaders provided the research team with their demographic information and CSE scale responses. We then matched the leaders' demographics and CSE scores to their respective followers' performance ratings and survey responses. Our final sample contained 173 matched leader-follower dyads with data points on all measures (i.e., 173 followers nested in 31 leaders; averaging 5.58 followers per leader ( $SD=5.04$ ), ranging from 1 to 25 followers).

In the final sample, the average age of leaders was 43.48 years ( $SD=7.42$ ), and 96.8% were male. The leaders were employed with the organization for an average of 8.55 years ( $SD=5.82$ ). The followers' average age was 40.72 years ( $SD=10.21$ ), 94.2% were male, and the average tenure with the organization was 7.23 years ( $SD=5.65$ ).

**Measures.** *Core Self-Evaluations.* CSE was measured with Judge et al.'s (2003) twelve-item CSE scale. A sample item is, "I am confident I get the success I deserve in life." Respondents answered each item on a 7-point Likert scale with anchors from 1 – strongly disagree to 7 – strongly agree (followers' CSE  $\alpha = .83$ ; leaders' CSE  $\alpha = .87$ ).

*Leader-Member Exchange.* LMX was measured with Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) seven-item, 7-point LMX measure, with anchors from 1 – strongly disagree to 7 – strongly agree. A sample item is, "My working relationship with my leader is effective" ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

*Leader-Rated Task Performance.* The organization did not have a formal performance appraisal system in place, which required us to develop performance items for the present study. The organization requested that performance evaluations were short because leaders had to rate a relatively high number of followers, and we surveyed leaders at two time points. Therefore we used two performance evaluation items similar to Janssen and Giebels (2012). The first item asked leaders to rate each follower's global performance because the majority

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of followers worked in a structured and low-complexity environment; leaders were not familiar with more sophisticated appraisal systems; and, ratings reflected leader's assessment of the performance aspects relevant in their immediate work environment (e.g., Hegarty, 1974; Meyer, Paunonen, Gellatly, Goffin, & Jackson, 1989; Smither, London, Flautt, Vargas, & Kucine, 2003). The item was: "Overall, how would you rate this employee's performance? Please circle the number that best represents this employee's performance." The response scale ranged from 1 – very poor to 7 – excellent.

The second item asked leaders to score their respective followers' performance compared with their peer group because the majority of followers were doing similar types of jobs, and leaders were able to evaluate the performance of their followers in a straightforward manner. The item was: "Compared with other employees in your team, please evaluate this employee's performance on a scale of 0 to 100. Please circle a number to indicate your rating of this employee compared with other employees in your team". The response scale ranged from 0 – much worse than others to 100 – much better than others (in percentile increments of 10, Meyer et al., 1989). The two items were standardized and combined into a single measure of performance. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the two items was .92.

*Control Variables.* We controlled for followers' gender (1, female; 0, male), age, organizational tenure, and educational attainment (1 – no qualifications to 6 – university degree or above) because previous theoretical and empirical studies have demonstrated that these variable are related to task performance (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Quinones, Ford, & Teachout, 1995; Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998).

**Data Analysis.** A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to examine whether there were differences among leaders' tendencies to provide generally high or generally low performance ratings. The insignificant F test,  $F(30,142)=1.32$ ,  $p=0.15$ , indicated that there

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were no differences across leaders' group mean follower performance ratings, with an  $ICC(1) = 0.06$  and an  $ICC(2) = 0.24$ . Although there was nesting in the data (i.e., followers nested in leaders), the insignificant analysis of variance results and low ICCs suggested that group effects were not likely to be present. Therefore, we present OLS hierarchical moderated multiple regression analysis with standardized variables. We also conducted hierarchical linear modeling (i.e., HLM; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) analysis in STATA/SE 12.1 package as a robustness check to examine whether results remained identical when taking into account nesting of the data, and results remained the same.

For the results that we have presented here, we initially ran our analysis with four follower control variables (gender, age, tenure, and education). These control variables were not significantly correlated with our dependent variable (performance) and were not significantly related to performance in our OLS hierarchical moderated multiple regression analysis. The model with only control variables explained 3% of the variance in follower performance; however, the model fit was insignificant,  $F(4,168)=1.42$ ,  $p=0.23$ .

Given the insignificant relationships between control variables and follower performance, we followed Becker's (2005) suggestion that models should not contain control variables which are not significantly correlated with the dependent variable. Hence, we ran our analysis without controls. We compared models that included the variables in the research model, two- and three-way interactions, with and without control variables. Significant model fit and findings were consistent for models including our variables of interest, two- and three-way interactions whether controls were included or not, indicating the robustness of our results. Therefore, we have reported results without controls in line with Becker's (2005) recommendation. The correlation table, however, includes the four follower demographic control variables.

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### Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for all study variables.

*Insert Table 1 about here*

Table 2 provides the results for the OLS hierarchical moderated multiple regression analysis in which variables and interactions are entered in steps. Step 1 included the main effects; Step 2 included two-way interactions; and, Step 3 included the three-way interaction. In Step 1, significant main effects at the 5% level were not found for fCSE or ICSE. However, in Step 1, LMX quality had a significant positive relationship with performance ( $\beta=0.23$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and was significantly positive in Steps 2 and 3. The three two-way interactions in Step 2 had no significant impact on follower performance. In Step 3, a significant three-way interaction ( $\beta=0.20$ ,  $p<.01$ ) explained 5% incremental variance.

Dawson (2014) suggested that the  $R^2$  variable may not be suitable for assessment of a moderator's effect size due to the shared variance among main effect and interaction variables. Therefore, following Dawson's (2014) critique, we also calculated the  $f^2$  for our three-way interaction as it may be a better measure to assess the size of an interaction effect. For our three-way effect, the  $f^2$  equalled 0.06. As a comparison, Cohen, Cohen, West and Aiken (2003) have suggested that  $f^2$  equal to 0.02 is a small effect size. We additionally conducted dominance (Azen & Budescu, 2003; Budescu, 1993; Tonidandel & LeBreton, 2011) and relative weight analyses (Johnson, 2000; Tonidandel & LeBreton, 2011) in STATA 12 using the *domin* command (Luchman, 2015). The results from these analyses suggest that our three-way interaction term contributed the most to model fit and explained the greatest variance in follower performance evaluation scores.

*Insert Table 2 about here*

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To clarify the directional nature of the slopes for the significant three-way interaction associated with follower performance, we plotted the interaction one standard deviation above and below the mean of LMX and leader and fCSE (Cohen et al., 2003). For low fCSE, the high ICSE, high LMX and the high ICSE, low LMX lines were at the same level. However, at high levels of fCSE, the direction of the two slopes diverged. The low ICSE, low LMX slope was almost a flat line, indicating that there was no systematic relationship between fCSE and performance (simple slope=.01, n.s.). The high ICSE, high LMX slope was significantly positive (simple slope=.24,  $p<.05$ ); while the high ICSE, low LMX slope was significantly negative (simple slope =-.27,  $p<.05$ ). The low ICSE, high LMX line was also significantly negative (simple slope=-.27,  $p<.05$ ).

Next, we examined whether the significant slopes were significantly different from one another (Dawson & Richter, 2006). The high ICSE, high LMX slope was significantly different from the others ( $p<.05$ ). Yet, the high ICSE, low LMX slope and the low ICSE, high LMX slope were not significantly different from each other indicating that, though performance was expressed at differing levels, both forms of leadership context had similar negative effects. Overall, the data indicated that Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported, and that there was no relationship between CSE and performance in low ICSE, low LMX contexts as expected. Results demonstrated that the fCSE-performance relationship was moderated by leadership context, and that there were negative performance consequences for high CSE followers working in leadership contexts characterized by either high ICSE and low LMX, or low ICSE and high LMX. Figure 2 depicts the moderated relationships between fCSE and performance.

*Insert Figure 2 about here*

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### Discussion

**Contributions and Implications.** Leadership contexts have the potential to provide or withhold psychological and material influence on the extent to which fCSE is activated and expressed in high performance behavior. We have proposed that leadership contexts exert a powerful influence on the activation and expression of fCSE, and that some leadership contexts comprise deadly combinations that have a negative effect on the fCSE-performance relationship. In advancing our model, we have shown that characterizing context as a combination of both ICSE and LMX quality enhances understanding of when fCSE is activated and expressed in performance, and how some leadership contexts are detrimental to the expression of fCSE in performance. Thus, we make several contributions to the CSE and leadership literatures.

First, we extend CSE theory (Judge et al., 1997; Judge et al., 1998) by reconsidering the nature of the CSE-performance relationship. CSE theory (Judge et al., 1997; Judge et al., 1998) suggests that high CSE, and the self-belief, goal orientation and achievement striving that go along with it, stimulate high performance behaviors (Erez & Judge, 2001; Joo, Jeung, & Yoon, 2010; Judge & Bono, 2001; Judge et al., 2003; Rich, LePine, & Crawford, 2010). We have taken an alternative perspective on the CSE-performance relationship by focusing on the evidence that the expression of CSE in performance is not inevitable (Kacmar et al., 2009). Examining the circumstances under which there is a negative relationship between CSE and performance is necessary because followers with high CSE seek internal consistency which, in behavioral terms, means aligning their dispositions with their levels of performance. Lack of alignment is distressing (Wiggins & Trapnell, 1996), and therefore of importance to CSE scholars. We have drawn upon Johns' (2006) assertion that context is critical to understanding organizational behavior, and we have extended CSE theory by scrutinizing the



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role that context plays in changing the relationship between fCSE and performance from positive to negative.

Examination of the functioning of the CSE-performance relationship has been extended by differentiating between high and low CSE followers. Judge et al.'s (Judge et al., 1997; Judge et al., 1998) expositions on the CSE concept have acknowledged that high and low levels of CSE are associated with different needs and expectations. However, most studies of the relationship between CSE and performance have not expanded upon the implications of these differences. Therefore, we examined the functioning of high and low CSE followers, and showed that their responses to leadership contexts do not simply mirror each other. Rather, our study shows that performance is sensitive to context and dependent on the level of fCSE. Hence, extending CSE theory by examining the functioning of high and low CSE contributes to a deeper understanding of when, and how, fCSE is expressed in performance.

Our second contribution lies in the synthesis of CSE theory (Judge et al., 1997; Judge et al., 1998) with LMX theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) which presents leadership contexts in terms of leaders, followers and the relationship between them. By joining the notions of trait CSE and LMX quality, we have built a framework for understanding both the make-up and the functioning of leadership contexts. In doing so, we have developed a four-fold model of leadership context that comprises high and low combinations of ICSE and LMX quality, and enables a nuanced view of how leadership contexts influence connections between followers' CSE and their performance.

We harnessed TAT (Tett & Burnett, 2003) as well as the notion of self-regulation (Vancouver & Day, 2005) to deepen understanding of how the leadership contexts created by specific combinations of ICSE and LMX influence the fCSE-performance relationship. Our

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study has shown that trait activation occurs for followers with high and low CSE with positive and negative outcomes on performance, respectively. Thus, although Tett and Burnett (2003) do not make specific predictions about the activation of low trait levels, the pattern of the fCSE-performance relationship in situationally congruent leadership contexts bears out the main assumptions of trait activation theory.

Our study has also examined how the fCSE-performance relationship functions when trait activation does not occur; that is, when the leadership context distracts, constrains or facilitates performance in some other way. Hence, our third contribution is to the leadership literature, and concerns the examination of these alternative mechanisms. One element of this contribution is the identification of deadly combinations, i.e. contexts that are detrimental to the functioning of the fCSE-performance relationship for high CSE followers. Our modeling led us to hypothesize that high fCSE is not channeled into high levels of performance when leadership disturbs internal consistency (Korman, 1970) and distracts self-regulatory energy away from the enactment of CSE and performance (Erez & Judge, 2001). We theorized, and demonstrated empirically, that leadership contexts comprising high ICSE and low LMX, and vice versa, are deadly combinations (Becker et al., 1997) for high CSE followers that provide dissonant information which discomforts followers by challenging their personal evaluations (Ashford, 1986). Hence, high fCSE is not activated and, because of the conflicting nature of the information provided by the leadership context, effort is required for self-regulation (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007) so energy is diverted away from performance (Robinson & Demaree, 2007; Schmader & Johns, 2003). The consequence is a negative relationship between fCSE and performance. Such reduction of performance is likely to be personally detrimental because it frustrates the expression of trait-based motives which causes distress (Cote & Moskowitz, 1998), and there are costly implications for organizations because

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performance capability is not maximized. Thus, by leveraging TAT and concepts related to evaluations of the self in context, we have shown how contexts distract the activation of fCSE and its expression in behavior, thereby extending leadership theory.

The four-fold model of leadership contexts also enables a contribution to the literature that has examined trait similarity between leadership and followers. This body of research demonstrates that leaders and followers who share similar traits experience more positive outcomes (e.g., Felfe & Schyns, 2010). However, our approach to extending the notion of congruence to both traits and relationship quality enabled us to distinguish between leadership contexts that are characterized by CSE similarity between followers and leaders, and yet differ in their LMX quality. We suggested that the low ICSE, high LMX leadership context brings the benefit of trait congruence (Markus & Wurf, 1987) to low CSE followers as well as providing psychological and material resources, and that there would be implications for follower performance. The data supported our view, and showed that low CSE followers have relatively high performance when working within a leadership context characterized by low ICSE and high LMX. Thus, while low CSE followers are not driven to perform in the same manner as their high CSE colleagues, the combination of dispositional correspondence and resources arising from the LMX relationship enable some level of effective performance which has implications for the development of theories of leadership and congruence.

A further implication for leadership theory arises from the observation that the fCSE-performance relationship was not significant in the low ICSE, low LMX relationship leadership context. The relationship between fCSE and performance was represented by a flat line. This finding accords with our hypothesizing concerning the situationally congruent nature of the low ICSE, low LMX context which is neither activating (Tett & Burnett, 2003) nor challenging (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007; Korman, 1970) for high CSE followers, yet is

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activating for low CSE followers. The data indicated that, although high fCSE was not expressed in high performance, high CSE followers did not find the situation as challenging as when faced with leadership contexts that provide dissonant information which conflicts with personal evaluations, disables trait activation, and prevents high fCSE from being channeled into high performance. The data also indicated that trait activation occurs for low CSE followers and their performance is commensurate with their low self-evaluations.

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research.** The current research has several methodological limitations that present avenues for further examinations of factors that influence the CSE-performance relationship. For instance, one limitation of this study is that we used only one facet of performance. This approach is typical for individual-level studies of performance (Heidemeier & Moser, 2009), and we selected an organization with relatively unambiguous performance criteria to provide greater evaluation clarity. Nevertheless, an additional source of performance assessment related specifically to the manufacturing context could have provided complementary data to compare with leadership evaluations. For example, individual-level data on other aspects of performance, such as frequency of accidents or productivity, could provide confirmation of our findings, or present an alternative perspective on the fCSE-performance relationship. It is also possible that roles involving more subjective performance criteria and with less routine could create a more complex context for the fCSE-performance relationship, and the leadership context might have a more powerful moderating effect because of increased ambiguity and ensuing difficulty for the activation and expression of high fCSE. Alternative dependent variables could be examined. For example, it is possible that contexts influence the relationship between fCSE and burnout, thus application of the Job Demands-Resources model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, &

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Schaufeli, 2001) could prove useful, and may shed further light on the differential functioning of high and low fCSE.

The current research had strong theoretical grounding, and gathered antecedent and moderator variables at a different point in time from the dependent variables. Nonetheless, causality would be more firmly established through a longitudinal data collection method. Future research could examine how distractors direct behavior away from performance, and assess the range of behaviors that followers engage in that are not directly connected to performance. There could also be examinations of dyadic characteristics, such as the length of time that leaders and followers have worked together, or similarities in demographic characteristics that may influence relationship quality (Hewstone & Ward, 1985). Schyns and Day (2010) argued that high levels of agreement between leaders' and followers' evaluations of LMX create LMX excellence which benefits performance through mutual liking, trust and flow of resources. Thus, the concept of LMX excellence may also be relevant to examinations of the development of, and fluctuations in, the LMX relationship which affect follower performance. Hence longitudinal study of cross-lagged effects would provide additional insights into the moderation of the fCSE-performance relationship by leadership context.

Our study gathered data from one manufacturing organization. Future research could consider different forms of organizations, and different types of work. As demonstrated in the current study, the interaction between dispositions and contexts is critical to understanding performance. Studies of the influence of leadership context on the fCSE-performance relationship in other roles and organizations may provide an expanded picture of fCSE functioning. Such research could extend the work of Kim, Hon and Lee (2010), and show how the specific demands, facilitators, distractors and constraints associated with different contexts relate to trait activation. For example, the association between fCSE and

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performance may be weakened in jobs that allow discretionary behaviors, or are unstructured, and strengthened when there are direct connections between traits and required behaviors (Judge & Zapata, 2015). The balance between task and social demands and resources may also influence the activation and expression of both high and low fCSE.

Thus, structure, autonomy, and trait-relevance of tasks are additional contextual features that could function alongside leadership contexts and influence the fCSE-performance relationship. Additional theoretical and empirical research is essential to understand these phenomena in more detail, and to gauge the extent to which the current theoretical framework is generalizable or whether different work environments produce different situational features that influence the nature of trait activation and the expression of trait-relevant behaviors in performance.

There are possibilities for theoretical extensions that examine the evaluative process in more detail. We have drawn upon Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) conceptualization of leadership to deepen understanding of how contexts influence followers. Extended theorizing to encompass further detail about the integration of personal and social information, and the significance of trait similarity between leaders and followers, would add to the current model and expand understanding of the activation process. Moreover, some followers may operate without the need for leadership. For instance, Nübold, Muck and Maier (2013) showed that state CSE moderated the relationship between followers' perceptions of transformational leadership and their motivation and performance such that the relationships are more positive for followers with low levels of state CSE. This raises the question of whether state fCSE is a form of context that provides a substitute for leadership (Kerr & Jermier, 1978), and provides another avenue for future study.

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**Practical Implications.** The findings from the current research yield three practical implications. First, rather than treating dispositions and relationships as distinct entities, and differentiated LMX relationships as a natural consequence of follower personality or group size (Erdogan & Bauer, 2010), leaders need to consider how their own CSE interacts with their dyadic relationships to create unique conditions for each follower's performance. Such a perspective aids understanding of how the contexts that leaders create influence the activation of followers' CSE and its expression in performance. This perspective also enables both leaders and followers to take a proactive approach to creating effective working environments that provide appropriate arenas for trait activation and, by extension, higher performance for those who seek to express their CSE in behavior that is valued by their leaders and their organizations.

Second, the current study has shown that leaders may create deadly combinations of variables that prevent activation and expression of high fCSE, frustrating these followers' needs to express their dispositions in behavior, and stifling their striving to perform. This is important because performance may be perceived as an outcome of followers' dispositions and effort, whereas a more holistic view of performance would consider followers within the context that their leaders create. The experience of contexts that distract the expression of CSE and divert it away from performance behaviors may be distressing for followers, and there are costly outcomes in terms of underperformance. In most cases, it is unlikely that leaders deliberately create contexts that prevent trait activation, yet the possibility of unintended consequences remains. Therefore, leaders need to smooth out the discrepancies that arise from combinations of high ICSE and low LMX, or low ICSE and high LMX, and align the context that they create with high CSE followers' needs for trait activation, trait expression and high performance.

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Third, this research is also of interest to human resource professionals who are charged with ensuring that the organization has a clear talent pipeline. If star performers with high levels of CSE are identified in the organization, it is imperative that they are matched with leaders who share a strong positive sense of self. At the same time, human resource professionals should ensure that leaders of upcoming talent are trained and supported to develop high quality relationships with high CSE followers to encourage higher performance. The human resource department should also be sensitive to both leaders and followers with low CSE. Training programs and on-the-job coaching that increase task-specific self-efficacy may help to offset lower levels of CSE and to stimulate performance, although future research in this area is clearly needed.

### **Conclusion**

The current research has proposed and tested a model of the influence of leadership context on the fCSE-performance relationship. We conceptualized the leadership context as the interaction between ICSE and perceptions of the LMX relationship. The model was informed by theories of CSE (Judge et al., 1997; Judge et al., 1998), LMX (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), trait activation (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000) and self-regulation (Vancouver & Day, 2005). Together, these theories contribute to a nuanced explanation of how leadership contexts influence the activation and expression of fCSE, and explain why there is a negative relationship between fCSE and performance when the activation of fCSE is prevented by leadership contexts comprising opposing values of ICSE and LMX. Future research should continue to explore how leadership contexts provide high CSE followers with the activation that they require to express their CSE in performance, and how leadership contexts provide low CSE followers with suitable resources.



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**Table 1****Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of Study Variables**

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Follower - Female	0.06	0.23	--						
2. Follower - Age	40.72	10.21	-0.15	--					
3. Follower - Tenure	7.23	5.65	-0.20**	0.44**	--				
4. Follower - Education	3.73	1.61	0.18*	-0.16*	-0.09	--			
5. fCSE	4.83	0.84	0.20**	0.04	-0.07	0.20**	--		
6. lCSE	5.02	0.92	0.15	0.06	0.24**	0.10	0.19*	--	
7. Follower LMX Perceptions	5.13	1.27	0.12	-0.02	-0.03	0.13	0.34**	0.16*	--
8. Leader Rated Follower Performance	-0.02	1.01	0.03	-0.07	0.06	0.12	0.09	0.17*	0.25**

*Note.* Descriptive statistics are based on 173 Follower-Leader dyad observations.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; Two-tailed tests.

fCSE = Follower core self-evaluations; lCSE = Leader Core self-evaluations; LMX = Leader-member exchange



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Table 2

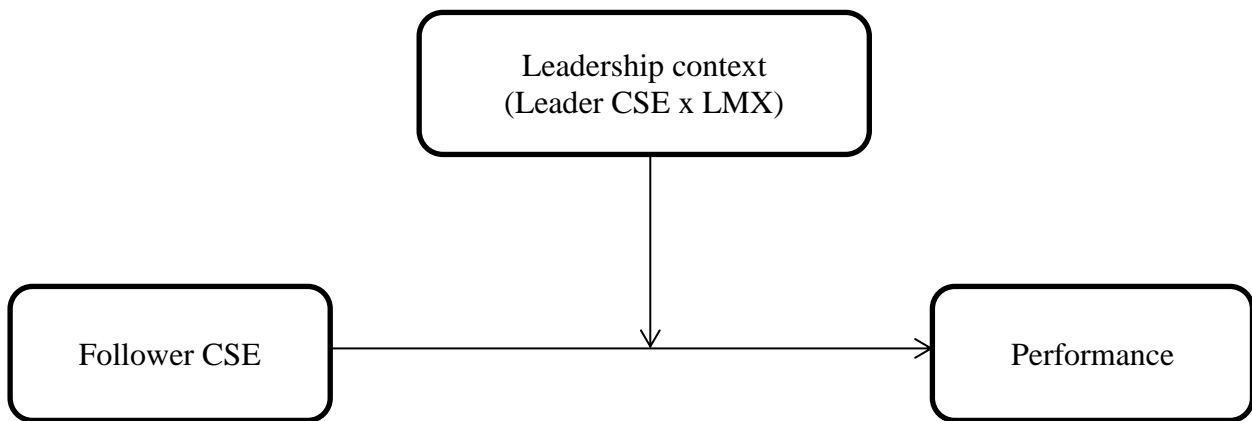
## OLS Hierarchical Moderated Multiple Regression for Follower Performance

Variables	Follower Performance Rated by Leader					
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
<i>Main Effects</i>						
fCSE	-0.01		-0.02		-0.07	
	(0.08)		(0.08)		(0.08)	
ICSE	0.14	†	0.15	†	0.09	
	(0.08)		(0.08)		(0.09)	
LMX	0.23	**	0.24	**	0.20	*
	(0.08)		(0.09)		(0.08)	
<i>Two-way interactions</i>						
fCSE x ICSE			0.06		0.06	
			(0.09)		(0.09)	
fCSE x LMX			0.02		0.06	
			(0.08)		(0.08)	
ICSE x LMX			-0.06		0.02	
			(0.07)		(0.08)	
<i>Three-way interaction</i>						
fCSE x ICSE x LMX					0.20	**
					(0.07)	
<i>F</i>	F(3,169)= 6.39**		F(6,166)= 3.56**		F(7,165)= 6.92**	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.08		0.08		0.13	
$\Delta R^2$			0.00		0.05**	

n = 173 follower-leader dyads (i.e., 173 followers nested in 31 leaders)

†p<.10; \*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; Two-tailed tests.

fCSE = Follower core self-evaluations; ICSE = Leader core self-evaluations; LMX = Leader-member exchange

**Figure 1****The Research Model**

**Figure 2****Three-way Interaction among Follower CSE, Leader CSE, and LMX**